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Northeast Stone Fruit Sponsors Want Answers to Living with Pits

by Linda McCandless

ROCHESTER, NY: Stone fruit growers are launching an organization Erma Brombeck might want to join. The Northeast Stone Fruit Sponsors (NESFS) was formed at the New York State Horticultural Society's annual meeting in January to provide information to Northeast fruit growers so they can profitably grow and market stone fruit.

"NESFS invites growers of all tender fruits, including sweet cherries, tart cherries, peaches, prunes, plums, and apricots to join," said Jim Bittner, a founding member whose family grows apples and stone fruit on a 500-acre fruit farm in Appleton, NY.

The new organization is regional in nature and will accommodate growers from all over northeastern United States. One of the objectives is to build diversity back into the tree fruit industry. Production figures from the New York Agricultural Statistics Service show a decline in the production of stone fruits in New York that is echoed in other Northeastern states. In 1920, for example, 2142 million pounds of apples were produced in New York, 99 million pounds of peaches, and 70,000 tons of pears. In 1990, apple production had dropped by a factor of two to 990 million pounds, but peach production had dropped by a factor of six to 14 million pounds, and pear production had dropped by a factor of four to 14,600 tons. The decline is just as dramatic for cherries. In 1950, there were 4600 tons of sweet cherries produced, and only 1000 tons in 1990. Tart cherry production in 1950 was 52.2 million pounds, and only 16.5 million pounds in 1990.

Farm families once shipped peaches, plums, pears and cherries for fresh markets from Boston to New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland and all points between. Closer to home, many towns had their own canning companies that processed not-so-perfect fruits from area growers into juice, jams, pie fillings, and jellies.

Bittner knows the benefits of diversification. "Because of the damage incurred to trees and fruit by the Labor Day storm, this was a really tough year for New York apple growers," he said. "Our farm would be in a lot rougher shape if we didn't have the stone fruits." About half of the acreage on Bittner's farm is dedicated to tart and sweet cherry and peach production for both the fresh and processing markets; the other half is apples.

In addition to building diversity, members of NESFS from New York and neighboring states intend to advocate stronger research efforts with land grant universities and the USDA.

"Universities respond a lot better to commodity organizations than they do to individual growers," said Bittner. "We need research on new varieties and rootstocks, research on breeding new varieties suited to New York, research on planting and training systems, research on insect and disease management, and marketing help."

The NESFS will provide seed money to fund research projects, set up cooperative university / industry test plots, and schedule tours and meetings to share information among producers. Activities for 1999 include cataloging stone fruit test plots located in the Northeast, organizing a stone fruit school in November, and arranging summer tours to see stone fruit at harvest.

The impetus behind NESFS was the Stone Fruit School held in Geneva, NY, last winter that was attended by 60 growers from all over the Northeast. NESFS charter board members are: Jim Bittner, Appleton, NY; Joe Nicholson, Geneva, NY; Steve Clark, Milton, NY; Jennifer Halsey, Watermill, NY; Mike Madison, Sodus, NY; Steve McKay, Hudson, NY; and Bob Andersen, Geneva, NY. Dues to join NESFS are \$50/year. If you are interested in joining NESFS, contact Jim Bittner, at 716-795-3709 or bittner58@aol.com

Note to Editors: This story can be downloaded from the NYSAES web site at <http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/pubs/press/1999/stonefruitspons.html>

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